DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 066 PS 024 566

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TITLE A Wholistic Approach to Conflict Resolution.
PUB DATE 12 Apr 96
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Association for Childhood Education International Conference (Minneapolis, MN, April 10-13, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Caregivers; Communication Skills; *Conflict Resolution; *Crisis Intervention; Curriculum Development; Day Care; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Environment; Foreign Countries; *Holistic Approach; Interpersonal Communication; Social Behavior; Social Development; *Student Centered Curriculum; Teacher Participation; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Child Centered Education; Crisis Management; Nonviolence; Peer Mediation

ABSTRACT

Conflict, as a natural part of daily life is to some extent inevitable in all child care centers. Children need to develop effective strategies to deal with conflict, and educators need to reduce the amount of conflict present in the total child care environment. Two roles early childhood educators can play in encouraging conflict resolution are (1) to assist children in developing conflict resolution skills and (2) to implement peace and conflict education curricula in the classroom. The wholistic approach to conflict resolution goes beyond these two child-centered approaches to include the administrative, parental, and teacher dimensions of conflict. This paper discusses several approaches to conflict resolution and includes the following sections: (1) "The Child Centered Approach," including individual negotiation and development of a conflict resolution curriculum from a global perspective; (2) "The Wholistic Approach," encompassing both children's and adult's conflicts in early childhood settings, and asserting that critical reflection on all the patterns of conflict is necessary to a peaceful child care environment; (3) "The Child-Centered/Wholistic Link," including a conflict scenario along with a discussion of crisis management and prevention; and (4) "Constructive Communication: The Key to Wholistic Conflict Resolution," outlining Virginia Satir's (1988) theory of communication styles--placater, blamer, distracter, computer, and negotiator. The paper concludes by noting that the wholistic approach to conflict resolution can best be achieved through implementing the negotiator communication style and that effective negotiation between early childhood teachers, administrators, parents, and children is essential to building high-quality child care programs. (BGC)

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A WHOLISTIC APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Paper presented at the Association for Childhood Education International Study Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota , April 12, 1996

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A WHOLISTIC APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict is a natural part of our daily lives. At least some conflict is inevitable in all child care centers. Children, parents, teachers and administrators invariably have some differences of opinion which must be resolved in a peaceful manner in order to maintain a quality early childhood program.The need for children to develop effective conflict resolution strategies has never been more apparent, due to the increasing number of children's daily disputes (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1992). A key consideration in guiding children's successful conflict resolution is the amount of conflict present in the **total** child care environment. When the overall amount of conflict in the center is fairly low, early childhood teachers are better able to guide children in the conflict resolution process (Wichert, 1989).

Two typical roles of early childhood teachers in conflict resolution have been to assist children in the development of conflict resolution skills and to implement peace and conflict education curricula in the classroom (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1992; Edwards, 1992). Both these responses are child-centered approaches which overlook conflicts between the parents and child care center staff. The wholistic approach to conflict resolution expands the basic child-centered orientation by addressing the administrative, the parental and the teacher dimensions of conflict. When disputes between children are viewed within the **total** context of the child care environment, more meaningful solutions can be achieved. Constructive communication and effective negotiation between all children and adults provide the foundation for effective conflict resolution throughout the child care center.

THE CHILD-CENTERED APPROACH

There are two distinct, but related, child-centered approaches to conflict resoution; 1) individual negotiation (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1992; Dinwiddie,1994) and 2) conflict resolution and peace education curriculum (Hinitz, 1994; Wichert, 1989). Although both child-centered approaches have the common goal of enabling young children to communicate effectively in solving their disputes, the focus of individual negotiation is on intervention between children in specific conflict situations and the focus of conflict resolution curriculum is on lesson plans and activities designed to enhance the group's general conflict resolution strategies. The negotiation approach begins with the individual child and is more specific and immediate than the curriculum approach, which focuses on general and generic negotiation strategies.

Individual Negotiation:

The central focus of individual negotiation is to assist children in developing conflict resolution skills when they are directly embroiled in conflict situations. This approach is most effective when it is initiated in the positive context of social problem solving. Social problem solving can best be achieved when early childhood teachers recognize that **a certain amount of conflict** is a postive and acceptable part of children's social development and that the teacher's role is to assist children in finding their own solutions to specific conflicts (Dinnwiddie, 1994). Children are encouraged to identify the conflict, to generate solutions through negotiation and to follow through with mutually agreed-upon solutions (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1992). The amount of direct teacher involvement in the negotiation process varies depending on the children's ages and developmental levels, with younger children needing more teacher assistance than older children in identification and resolution of specific problems (Oken-Wright, 1992). Many elementary schools have peer mediation programs wherein the children are responsible for solving their own

disputes, independent of direct teacher involvement (Stomfay-Stitz, 1994). Children who have experienced effective individual negotiation in child care programs have potentially developed some of the conflict resolution strategies essential for the success of these peer mediation programs.

Conflict Resolution Curriculum:

The curricular approach to conflict resolution ranges from a general global perspective of creating peaceful environments to specific plans and activities designed to promote conflict resolution. Depending on the particular curriculum used, goals could include teaching peace, social justice, social problem solving, political participation and concern for the environment (Hudson, 1991; Prutzman, Sgern, Berger and Bodenhamer, 1988). The global perspective describes ways in which to create democratic and participatory envionments characterized by a community of caring and well-being (Edwards, 1992). Paramount in this global perspective is the development of positive social relationships and an emphasis on building social problem solving skills (Wittmer and Honig, 1994). The more specific plans include comprehensive, structured packaged programs, some of which contain time-lines, lesson plans and teaching materials (Fox, 1980; Peterson,1993; Shure,1992). There are also a variety of curricular materials designed to enhance conflict resolution and social problem solving in both academic subjects and in play activities. Specific books and storytelling exercises in language arts have been designed to promote prosocial behavior and social problem solving (Luke and Meyers, 1995; McMath, 1989; Wittmer and Honig, 1994) and play activities and games have been designed to promote social cooperation and problem solving (Bos, 1990; Orlick, 1985; Kriedler, 1994).

One example of an early childhood curriculum guide is Wichert's, " Keeping the Peace: Practicing Cooperation and Conflict Resolution with Preschoolers". This guide provides a variety of strategies and specific activities designed to assist children in the conflict resolution process (Wichert, 1989). The learning objectives of cooperative task completion, improved communication skills, analogy and consensus serve as a framework for all the cooperative group and social problem solving activities presented. In the activity entitled the " Cooperative Spider Web", children communicate and negotiate as they complete the task of constructing a web by rolling a ball with a string attached to one another.

The individual negotiation and group curriculum approaches to conflict resolution are inexorably linked because both focus on childrens' social problem solving and negotiation skills. Neither approach addresses the teacher or parental role in sometimes causing and perpetuating conflict in early childhood programs.

THE WHOLISTIC APPROACH

The wholistic approach to conflict resolution encompasses both the children's and adult's conflicts in early childhood settings. Conflicts between children can be indirectly caused by conflict-laden situations and faulty communications amongst teachers, administrators and parents. When adults in child care environments learn to identify and deal effectively with their own particular conflicts, they will lessen the tension responsible for some of the children's conflicts and they will lower the amount of conflict present in the **total** child care center. In addition, children will be far better prepared to negotiate equitable solutions to their own disputes when they have the benefit of observing adults who model peaceful conflict resolution.

The wholistic approach provides a comprehensive view of the multifacted dimensions of conflict inherent in early childhood classrooms through establishing specific links between children's and adult's conflicts. Conflicts rarely surface in isolation. Rather most conflicts are intrinsically related to other conflicts and tensions. Critical reflection on **all the patterns of conflict** that permeate a child care program is the most effective step in achieving a more peaceful child care environment.

THE CHILD-CENTERED/WHOLISTIC LINK

The connection between the child-centered and wholistic approaches to conflict resolution is analogous to a simmering pot of water coming to a boil. A simmering pot of water could be pictorially represented by a heat source, a series of tiny bubbles beneath the water surface and larger boiling bubbles on the surface. Conflicts in child care centers erupt like the boiling bubbles due to the simmering tensions between both adults and children. Underlying problems such as faulty communications or ineffective center policies are oftentimes the "heat source" responsible for these tensions. The child-centered approach to conflict resolution has the narrow focus of dealing only with childrens' surface conflicts. The wholisitic approach is far more comprehensive because it focuses on all three dimensions of conflict; 1) the children's "boiling" surface conflicts, 2) the "simmering" relationship tensions between both adults and children and 3) the underlying "heat sources" of the conflict. Critical reflection on the patterns of conflict from all three dimensional levels can facilitate comprehensive conflict resolution throughout the entire program. This reflection is most meaningful when administrators and teachers discuss and analyze specific conflict scenarios.

A Conflict Scenario: Superhero Fantasy Play

Two children are engaged in a heated dispute, accompanied by physical aggression, over access to a Batman figure that one of the children has brought from home. The children who are good friends become extremely upset, the parents are concerned about the physical aggression displayed by their children and the teachers become frustrated over a series of similar superhero conflicts. When this series of conflicts is discussed at a subsequent staff meeting, it becomes apparent that teachers hold diverse opinions on whether superhero fantasy play should be permitted. Some teachers support this form of dramatic play as important for children's social and cognitive development, while others oppose this play because of the accompanying aggression. It becomes clear that mutually agreed-upon policy guidelines should be developed by the administrator and teachers in order to diminish further aggressive superhero play conflicts.

In this conflict scenario the children's superhero disputes represent the **boiling surface conflicts**, the divided teacher opinions regarding the value and permissability of superhero play represent the **simmering relationship tensions** , and the lack of policy guidelines represent the underlying **heat source**. A child-centered approach to this case scenario would address only the surface conflict by assisting the children to negotiate a solution to their Batman dispute. In wholistic conflict resolution, the children's Batman dispute would be discussed in the context of divided teacher opinion and the lack of clearly difined guidelines on superhero play. The child-centered approach is "reactive" and is directed at crisis management in specific conflict situations, while the wholisitic approach is "proactive" and is directed towards prevention of devisive and damaging conflicts throughout the entirechild care program.

Crisis Management: The Top-Down Perspective

The link between child-centered and wholistic approaches to problem solving can be be viewed

from a top-down perspective, beginning with specific childrens' conflicts. In the case of the Batman superhero scenario, the immediate dispute between children engaged in physical aggression needed to be addressed. The teacher had to adopt a "reactive" stance to the immediate "crisis", in order to ensure that the children would not become physically injured. Once the children were settled and their immediate dispute was resolved, the child care center staff could adopt a top-down perspective in establishing the links between the Batman dispute and the other related conflicts, such as divided teacher opinion on the value of superhero play and the suitability of this type of play in the child care center. When the links between these conflicts are recognized, the underlying cause of the conflicts can be elucidated. In the top-down perspective, childrens' conflicts create a window in which to view the underlying adult tensions and disputes.

Prevention:The Bottom-Up Perspective

The link between the child-centered and wholistic approaches to conflict resolution is most effective when a bottom-up perspective is used. The bottom-up perspective is "proactive" because child care center staff are actively involved in establishing a framework for preventing serious conflicts, rather than waiting for these conflicts to occur. This framework is designed **both** to encourage positive relationships between children, parents, teachers and administrators **and** to establish mutually agreed-upon policy guidlines which will minimize the overall conflict in the child care program(Honig and Wittmer, 1996). Part of this framework could include implementation of a conflict resolution curriculum to provide children with strategies needed in solving conflicts (Hinitz, 1994). The case scenario of the Batman dispute could have been potentially avoided using the bottom-up perspective had there been a clear, mutually agreed-upon policy prohibiting children from bringing superhero toys to the center.

The goal of conflict resolution viewed from the bottom-up perspective is prevention. Preventing serious childrens' conflicts can best be achieved through constructive communications between all persons in the child care center. When relationships between teachers, parents and children are characterized by constructive communication, a model for conflict resolution is perpetuated throughout the child care environment. To further the analogy of the simmering pot of water, the familiar saying that " a watched pot never boils" should be considered. Child care administrators, teachers and parents who carefully observe or "watch" the child care environment, monitoring any potential tensions and hostilities through constructive communication, will create a climate where many serious conflicts between children can be avoided.

CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION: THE KEY TO WHOLISITIC CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Early childhood teachers and administrators have the responsibility of engaging in constructive and effective communication with children, parents and with one another in order to create a climate conducive to conflict resolution. An important step in achieving this communication is critical reflection on personal communication styles. The eminent social worker, Virginia Satir, described five distinct communication styles; 1) the placater, 2) the blamer, 3) the distracter, 4) the computer and 5) the negotiator styles (Satir, 1988). All communication characterized by the first four communication styles are faulty and lead to misunderstandings and tensions in relationships. Only the negotiator style is conducive to meaningful, constructive communication. A short descrition of Satir's communication styles follow;

-The **placater** or "people pleasing" style of communication focuses on keeping everyone content by avoiding confrontation as much as possible. The teacher who witnesses a child being pushed down on the playground for no apparent reason and responds by hugging the victim and telling her to stay away from the perpetrator is demonstrating the placater communication style.

-The **blamer** communication style is authoritarian and is designed to offer instant solutions to the conflict. The teacher who immediately takes away a red wagon under dispute, stating that "nobody can play with it now" exemplifies the blamer communication style.

-The **distracter** style diverts the conflict participants away from their dispute by talking about something totally unrelated to the conflict. During a staff meeting an administrator who introduces a discussion on a fundraising event while two teachers are embroiled in a heated dispute over their schedules is using the distracter communication style.

- The **computer** communication style offers intellectual platitudes in an impersonal manner. A teacher whose only response when two children are involved in a conflict is to tell them to " use their words instead of their fists "is engaged in a computer style response.

- The **negotiator** communication style differs from the other four styles in that conflict is recognized as legitimate and important. The goal of this communication style is to

receive effective and equitable resolutions to conflict. A teacher exemplifies this communication style when she approaches two children who are pushing one another and encourages them to state their views and to generate solutions to their dispute.

The wholisitic approach to conflict resolution can best be achieved when early childhood center staff engage in constructive communication, using the negotiator communication style. Satir found that most people engage in the negotiator style infrequently and that they adopt one of the faulty communication styles the majority of the time (Satir, 1988). Teachers and administrators should reflect on their daily communications in order to ensure that they are not adopting the placater, blamer, distracter or computer styles. Exercises designed to identify Satir's communication styles can provide a useful format for self-reflection and meaningful discussion (See Appendix A for examples of communication style exercises). These exercises should enable child care center staff to recognize their faulty communication styles in subsequent conflict situations and should further assist them in developing constructive communication by improving their negotiation strategies.

Effective negotiation between early childhood teachers, administrators, parents and children is an important goal for building quality child care programs. When negotiation is modeled by adults, a peaceful climate conducive to establishing meaningful relationships is developed. Children then learn to engage in social problem solving, secure in all their relationships in a quality child care environment.

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APPENDIX A

Write the name of the communication style depicted by each response, using the Satir model.

Conflict Situation #1: The Teacher's Involvement in Child/Child Conflict
Jordan approaches the teacher and reports that Fletcher pushed him and said that he couldn't play with his Batman because he could only play with "baby toys".

_____ The teacher tells Jordan that she would like to read him a book.

_____ The teacher gives Jordan a hug and responds that there are lots of other nice toys to play with and that Fletcher will tire of the Batman toy soon.

_____ The teacher tells Jordan not to be so "distressed" and that you can't really call any toys "baby toys" because all toys can be used by children of all ages.

_____ The teacher tells Jordan that she will come with him while he and Fletcher talk.

_____ The teacher tells Fletcher that since he shoved Jordan that he has to put his Batman toy away right now.

Conflict Situation #2: The Administrator's Role at a Staff Meeting

The administrator has placed the topic of "bringing toys from home" on the agenda for a staff meeting. She introduces the agenda the following way:

_____ The administrator states that children will not be able to bring toys from home anymore because there have been too many problems lately.

_____ The administrator tells the staff that she has recently "come to the conclusion that disputes in the playroom regarding toys from home are causing strife amongst the children."

_____ The administrator says that she would like to spend some time discussing the recent problems regarding toys from home because there appears to divided teacher opinion.

_____ The administrator tells the teachers that she knows they have differing opinions about toys from home, but she has confidence that such dedicated teachers can work it out between themselves without any help from her.

_____ The administrator tells the teachers she knows there are problems regarding toys from home and they can talk about it at their potluck supper following the staff meeting. She adds that she has made her "best-ever" chocolate cake.